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Talking Religion Today

Joan Chittister

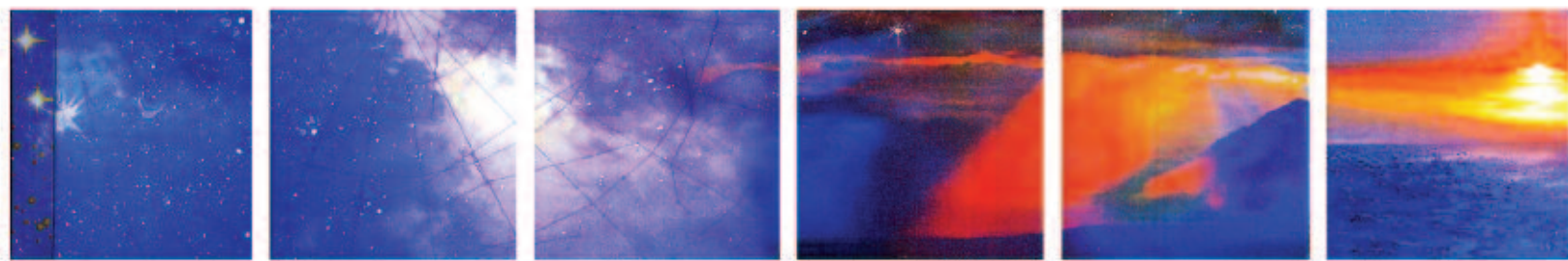
Diarmuid O'Murchu

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Talking Religion Today

"What is not in the language cannot be in the mind"

Joan Chittister, Diarmuid O'Murchu

Does religion have a language of its own suited to and valid for every age? Does much religious language go over people's heads either because it comes from a bygone time or is transmitted in a language all its own? Language is a means of communication: I speak or write. You hear or read. But do we communicate?

At a recent two-day gathering in Oakville, Ontario, American Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister and Irish-born Diarmuid O'Murchu (translated into English — Dermot Murphy) treated their audience to a conversation and some fresh thinking about God and religion today.

God

The old catechism description was: "God is the Creator and Sovereign Lord of heaven and earth and of all things." A 15-word answer that the audience had stored up in their memories from grade school. How about the answer Moses got from God way back in the Sinai desert: "I am who I am" — "Tell them 'I am' has sent you." In English easy to learn by heart — but does the answer leave us any the wiser?

God was soon called God the Father, but there was a feminine side to this God: "I have heard the cry of my people ... I am sending you to 'deliver' them." Is God a midwife? If we are made in the image and likeness of God our purpose in life is to give life. We can expect that one of the main questions

on the final exam will be "Were you a life-giver?"

"God is everywhere" — so where might we search for God today? Up there, out there, down here, in here (pointing to ourselves).

"God knows" — way beyond our knowledge, where we came from, where we are, where we're going.

We grow in the image and likeness of the God we choose to believe in — so what is my current "picture" of God?

Life here and now, life to come

The threefold emphasis on past, present, and/or future weaves in and out of many lives. We are people of a tradition. We grow up through a handed-down tradition, we accept what we have received — sometimes willingly, some-

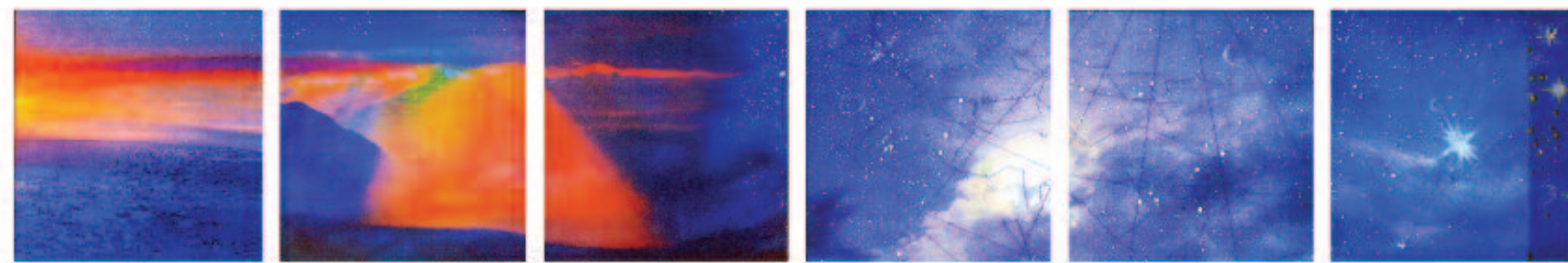
times critically. We may hand it on, we may reject or modify it — ours may be a critical acceptance. It's not necessarily an unquestioned acceptance. Our faith evolves as it goes through various stages of belief. We, in turn, may hand on what we have received or we may hand a modified version of that reception. Our faith evolves as we hold on to it, let some of it go, discover this or that other aspect of it.

The Holy Spirit may be seen as both an anchor from the past and a lure from the future. The presence and power of that Spirit recharges our energy. Religions and religious beliefs both remain as is and evolve. This double tendency causes no little debate in families, schools and parishes and no little turmoil within one's own approach to religion. What we believe becomes what we hand on to the next generation. What we feel about God, church, religion win out.

Growth

We are a work in progress. Our hope is that like Jesus we will grow in wisdom, age and grace — maybe unlike him we will do it one step at a time. Mistakes help us to do better next time round.

God stands by us as we grow. We're not finished yet — God isn't finished



Creation Window at Cathedral of the Holy Family, Saskatoon
by Sarah Hall, RCA

with us either. Am I the person I was back then or have I evolved?

Failure is a necessary aspect of life. Through it God encourages us with his “Try again” alluring presence. We become what God sees in us sometimes gradually, sometimes early on in life.

Our spirituality

What we concentrate on, how we pray, eat, sleep, work, spend our leisure time — life’s diversity is gradually replacing religion’s uniformity. Spirituality is wider than religion — our sense of the sacred leads us to repeat what Jacob said after his open-air dream about the ladder that linked heaven and earth: “God was in this (rocky) place and I never knew it.”

The dualism of Sacred v Secular will diminish considerably as we begin to understand the catechism answer to the question, Where is God? A. God is everywhere. Let us totally eliminate the second part of that answer as we learned it in school: “... even our most secret thoughts and actions are naked and open to his eyes.” How to spoil a perfectly positive three-word answer!

We are in between two worldviews with two opposite approaches:

- a) We live in a vale of tears — we escape to salvation in the next life, in a world beyond this one.

- b) We engage the world we’re actually in; we embrace all God’s creation. How do we do this and encounter God in it?

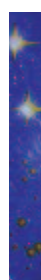
From that ... to what?

Let us begin where God begins — with Creation. Let us begin with the vast cosmic horizon: the Sun and all those

Alienation occurs when we fail to relate to what is going on — when we’re not “at home” on earth and in the cosmos.

Spirituality and homecoming

When we remain close to nature we get it right. So our Creator’s invitation is “Come Home to the Cosmos and Planet Earth.” Our true story of 7,000,000



Let us begin where God begins — with Creation. Let us begin with the vast cosmic horizon: the Sun and all those stars — our great source of energy. But let us be grounded with both feet on the Earth.

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God is Trinity: so relationships are all-important. As humans we belong to a Web of Belonging, a Web of Relationships, an Inter-weaving Web of Life.

We also belong to and are at home on a Living Earth. The Spirit energizes the energy of all creation. Patterns and Imprints unfold. So inter-dependence / inter-relating and co-operating are the fundamental imprints we will leave behind us.

years is too often a story of separation from the “web” of life: the creativity of ritual making; the empowerment of the feminine; spirit needing body and working through bodies — hence the Incarnation: God loves bodies.

How unfinished is our understanding of God for whom relationships matter — think of the Trinity. Hence Jesus and the kingdom of God are about companionship and empowering one another. And because relationships matter — where do the poor and the outcasts and the uprooted fit into today’s dialogue? ■